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ABSTRACT

Two different groups of sixth graders were studied as one discussed Roald Dahl's "James and the Giant Peach" and the other discussed Mark Twain's "Tom Sawyer." In interviews, students from the two groups offered very different assessments of their experiences, despite the fact that the teacher was the same. The Dahl students, who were remedial readers, did not like their discussion group. They thought their teacher would have done better to have explained the book directly to them. On the other hand, the Twain students, who were advanced readers, valued discussion groups because these groups introduced them to the varied opinions of their peers. Transcripts of the first meeting for both groups show that these immediately showed signs of contrasting patterns: while the Twain students took advantage of the open forum by offering long answers to teacher questions and involved responses to other students, the Dahl group offered only brief, "safe" answers to the teacher's leading questions. Why the contrast, when the instructor himself was striving for the same informal exchange in both groups? One answer lies in the respective educational pasts of the two groups. The Twain students had done group work before and throughout the primary grades had been treated as gifted students; the Dahl students, by contrast, had participated only in traditional teacher-student discussions and had learned to think of themselves as below average. Perhaps the Dahl students need to be shown somehow what an informal discussion is like. (TB)

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Frustration and Fulfillment: The Talk of Literature Discussion Groups

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I'd like to start by looking at the comments of two different groups of sixth graders. I asked these students to share their reactions to the small group literature discussions in which they were involved. The first group was reading James and the Giant Peach by Roald Dahl (1961). They said:

I wish, you know, it wasn't no group, you know he [the teacher] just comes over (points to own desk) and explain it to you like that because sometime when you in the group he doesn't explain it because he has other children to explain to, right, so when you not in the group he could explain it to you more. If I was the teacher I wouldn't have it, you know, no group.

The second group was reading The Adventures of Tom Sawyer by Mark Twain (1972). These children said:

You can't hear what other people have to say about it [the text] unless you get together as a group and talk. I think it's good to have a group of people reading together on the same book so they can like help each other. They could discuss it together, and, they could basically work together. Some things you don't get by just reading the book by yourself, but when you discuss it some other person might find something that you didn't know, and then you like, get to know that.

Although I've included the comments of only four students here, they are representative of their peers in each group.

Even a quick look at these statements is revealing. It seems Dahl students wished their teacher didn't have literature discussion groups because these groups limited the teacher's ability to instruct them. Several of them suggested that a better approach would be to meet with the teacher one-on-one so he could explain the story and clear up individuals' comprehension problems.

On the other hand, it is evident that Twain students valued the opportunity to collaborate with peers. Group discussions introduced them to varied opinions on the shared text and enhanced

their text comprehension and appreciation, as they learned from each other.

Whereas Dahl students seemed to view the teacher as authoritative dispenser-of-information (he is the one who "explains it"), Twain students focused on the knowledge that develops as peers work together.

How can it be that two groups of students in the same classroom, ostensibly engaged in the same activity, mediated by the same teacher, view that activity so differently?

The Context for the Study

Before I try to answer that question, let me tell you a little bit more about the students and the teacher, Mark. I spent one school year in Mark's sixth grade classroom, observing, audiotaping and interviewing. Because Mark taught in an urban, magnet school his students came from neighborhoods across the city and from diverse sociocultural backgrounds. Mark had been teaching for twenty years. Small group literature discussions were the core of his reading program.

My focus today is on two literature discussion groups which Mark formed at the start of school in September, on the basis of Informal Reading Inventory scores. The Dahl group was comprised of four students who Mark judged to be at about a fourth grade reading level. They were among the weakest readers in the class. On the other hand, the Twain group included some of the most competent readers in the class. According to Mark they were reading at or

above grade level.

Mark's purpose for these literature groups was two-fold. First he felt that by discussing their ideas and questions with peers, students could develop deeper understanding of a text. Second, he felt that sharing their responses to a book would lead to "deeper appreciation" for literary texts and he wanted, above all, for his students to leave sixth grade with a love for reading critically-acclaimed literature.

Before the school year began, when I asked Mark to describe what he would consider "a good literature discussion," he explained: "If I said nothing and the kids just generated the energy. I might goose the discussion along from time to time but basically it's the kids." Theory and research support Mark's belief in the value of student discussion, facilitated by a teacher. A growing body of work describes such discussions as a powerful tool for encouraging deeper thinking, understanding, and appreciation (Barnes, 1975; Britton, 1982; Edwards & Westgate, 1987; Leont'ev, 1981; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978, 1981; Watson & Young, 1986; Wertsch, 1985), and several researchers have focused specifically on how discussions of literature can enrich children's reading experiences (Golden, 1987; Rosenblatt, 1985).

Why then are certain students less enamored with literature discussions than research and theory suggest they should be?

Although answering these questions thoroughly requires attention to many issues, I have explored a number of these elsewhere (Wollman-Bonilla, 1991, 1994). Since my time is limited,

I want to look more closely at students' sense of purpose for the literature discussion groups and at the kind of talk that resulted from their expectations. I think this slice of data can take us a long way toward understanding why some groups fulfilled Mark's expectations and others frustrated him.

The Purpose for Literature Discussion Groups

Early in the school year, as literature groups were getting underway, I asked students whether Mark had ever told them why they were meeting in these groups or what he wanted them to do there. Every student said Mark had never explained his purpose or expectations to them, and Mark confirmed that he had offered no such explanations.

Yet each student, without hesitation, clearly described to me what he or she thought was the purpose for students meeting together. Dahl students believed the literature groups were formed so Mark could transmit his comprehension to them. For example, Claudia said, "He knows how to read and tells us what's it mean." Her friend Lucia explained: "He's trying to help us . . . to make sure that we understand it." Miles said, "Mark can help me, we can go over that [assigned reading]." And Hubert insisted that students must "pay close attention . . . he explains everything, what it means and how it is." None of these students mentioned the possibility of learning from or collaborating with peers to make sense of the text or to share reactions to it.

In contrast, the Twain students consistently told me that the

purpose of literature groups was to work together with peers to develop a better understanding of the text and an appreciation of diverse perspectives on it. All Twain students argued that every member of the group had a responsibility to contribute to discussions because the point of the meeting was, as Julia said "to help us understand the book" by learning from each other. Theresa explained: "When you're in a group, you know, people help you . . . you actually learn." Christopher believed the discussions make it possible "for other kids to help you." He continued: "To see the point of other kids, not just Mark . . . is very helpful." Like the other Twain students, Lynette valued her peers' thinking: "If I didn't understand I know there's someone in there who did, or who can help me, so I can see the other side of it." Carlos agreed, the reason for the groups was so that "you know what more people think." And Collette said "you get to learn new things . . . from other people's opinions."

The Twain students insisted that their contributions were as, or more, important than the teacher's. When asked who she learned the most from during group meetings Collette said "it's mostly the kids." Julia pointed out: "[Mark] doesn't know everything." Lynette also refused to privilege Mark's comments: "I might not agree with him, but it's his opinion . . . we both could be right."

As you can imagine, Dahl and Twain students' expectations for literature discussion groups had a powerful impact on what happened when these groups met. Let me give you an example by sharing excerpts from the very beginning of the first meeting of each

group.

The Discourse of the Dahl Group

Teacher: Many books that have illustrations on the cover, tell you something about the story. What does this tell you, if anything, about the story?
Claudia: That there is a peach (whispered).
Teacher: Okay, wh- that there is a what?
Claudia: A peach (louder).
Teacher: What about it?
Claudia: They're giant.
Teacher: How can you tell that this particular peach is giant?
Lucia: You see from it, you can tell right away (looking down at her book).
Teacher: How can you tell right away? Why couldn't it just be a big peach or a regular sized peach?
Miles: It's the insects (looking down at his book).
Teacher: What?
Miles: It's the insects. The insects small compared to a peach.
Teacher: Ahhh. Uh, is there something unusual about this peach in terms of where it is?
Lucia: It's flying. Like the birds are flying (pointing at her book cover).

Dahl students' contributions were brief and they rarely explained their thinking or provided evidence for their assertions unless asked. Mark's repeated question "How can you tell?" (lines 9 and 12) exemplifies the need to probe in order to elicit elaboration. Further, Mark began to ask increasingly pointed questions, to get the Dahl students to offer the information he expected. For example, because of it's novelty and prominence in the cover illustration, one might expect students to volunteer right away that the peach was giant and flying through the air. Instead he had to ask "What about it?" on line 7 and later, on lines 17-18, "Is there something unusual about this peach in terms of where it is?"

Right away Mark grew concerned about students' participation and understanding, and he decided to begin reading the book together with the group. He instructed Lucia to read the first sentence and then asked a comprehension question:

Teacher: Um, who's that picture of?
Lucia: James.
Teacher: James? Do you want to read, can you read his real name?
Lucia: James Henry Trotter.
Teacher: James Henry Trotter. And how old is James? Miles?
Miles: Four.
Teacher: Correct, four years old. That's four year old James Henry Trotter. Let's look in that picture, how would you describe it? How is he feeling? I'm talking about the picture on page one, does he look happy or sad?
?: I think he looks happy.
Teacher: You think he looks happy? Why do you think he looks happy?
Miles: He ain't smiling.
Teacher: He's not smiling, what is he doing?
Hubert: He's holding the cat.
Teacher: He's holding the cat. Is he being relaxed or tense?

Within ten minutes of the Dahl group's inception, Mark began to rely on questions in which he offered two simple alternatives (e.g. "Does he look happy or sad?") This forced-choice questioning made it less risky for students to venture answers, and guided them to do two things they seemed incapable of or unwilling to do otherwise: to focus on the information Mark felt was important and to sustain topics which were on the floor. For example, Hubert answered the open-ended follow up question on line 35, "What is he doing?" with an observation that seemed unrelated to the topic of how James is <u>feeling</u>. In response, Mark tried to help students provide an answer to his original question, asking another forced-choice question: "Is he being relaxed or tense?"

From this point on, Mark led students in reading aloud a paragraph at a time. He generally asked a literal comprehension question at the end of each paragraph and called on students by name to answer it. In this way he could keep everyone involved, at least superficially, as well as check individual's comprehension, which was a concern, based on students' reticence.

The Discourse of the Twain Group

Mark asked the same question at the start of the Twain group as he had in the Dahl group. However, in the Twain group everyone eagerly offered his or her ideas in response. Christopher spoke first:

Teacher: Take a look at the picture on the cover. What, if anything, does it tell you about the book?
Christopher: That there are boys in it and it's a book from the country.
Teacher: How do you know this?
Christopher: Well, they're from a farm because they have farm clothes and that looks like a farmhouse (pointing to cover illustration).

As in this excerpt, Mark's contributions often encouraged students to look to the text to back up their assertions or to say more about the topics they had initiated.

But Mark did not need to ask the Twain students a series of leading questions to keep the discussion going. In fact, their initial comments were relatively lengthy and they often elaborated on these spontaneously, frequently building on peers' contributions, as in the next excerpt:

Collette: It looks like he's walking through the forest.
Teacher: Uh huh.
Collette: Next to a river, the river's back here (points to

her cover illustration).

Gabriel: There's a boat and that's his older brother and he's fighting with him.

Christopher: Yeah.

Boris, who had a different illustration on his cover continued:

Boris: If this is [Tom Sawyer], this kid is lazy then (pointing to his cover illustration). And I say that because it's like, he's like, "Oh hum de dum dum dum," while this other kid is doing all of the work.

Teacher: Uh huh. In other words, if that is Tom Sawyer, you'd think Tom Sawyer would be a kind of lazy kid?

Boris: Yeah.

Several: Yeah.

Christopher: While he's painting the wall.

The discussion continued until each student had volunteered his or her thoughts about the cover illustration. Then Lynette turned to the preface and initiated a new topic, saying: This book was first published in 1876." The group followed Lynette's lead, discussing how old the book is and then reading the preface.

Contrasting Group Discourse Patterns

It is important to remember that Mark began the first meeting of both the Dahl and Twain groups by asking a nearly identical open-ended question, intended to facilitate informal discussion about whatever students noticed in the cover illustration.

Twain students' participation at the first meeting matched what they said during interviews: that it was important for students to voluntarily share ideas with peers and the teacher. Their talk seemed to fulfill Mark's expectations for literature discussion groups.

Dahl students' participation during their first meeting was

likewise congruent with what they said during interviews. They looked to Mark to control the discourse by introducing topics, asking questions, and allocating turns. Mark was disappointed that they were "reluctant to talk" and seemed to be "in a fog." Frustrated that he had to alter his goals, he explained to me that he had no choice but to take a directive role, simply to get students to say anything.

I have dwelled on the first meeting of each group because in those first few minutes there emerged characteristic discourse patterns which were maintained throughout the remaining 17 meetings of the Dahl and Twain groups which I taped.

Why These Differences?

I still have not answered the question of why these differences existed. Surely there are many, complex reasons for the differences I've discussed, but I think that the school experiences and attitudes students brought to Mark's classroom can help to explain what happened.

The Dahl students' prior experiences with reading instruction included traditional, teacher-directed reading groups and one-on-one instruction focused on word identification strategies and basic comprehension. In contrast, at least half of the Twain students had had some experience with literature groups as well as other cooperative learning groups.

Whereas Twain students expected literature group meetings to be student-dominated, informal conversations, it seems students in

the Dahl group expected these meetings to be like the reading group lessons they had experienced in the past--teacher-dominated question-answer sessions. It is no surprise then that Dahl students waited to be questioned and called on before participating in the group, kept their contributions brief, and rarely explained their thinking. When, in an effort to get students to participate and display what they knew, Mark resorted to the traditional teacher-talk he had hoped to avoid, he probably, inadvertently, confirmed their initial expectations that literature discussion groups would be like their previous reading groups.

Related to their past experiences with reading instruction is Dahl and Twain students' sense of their own reading ability. As below-grade level readers throughout their school careers, it seems inevitable that the Dahl students would have low self-esteem in this area. In fact, three of the four Dahl students told me they always had trouble in school reading programs and they considered themselves poor readers.

Further, Dahl students viewed each other as poor readers. When I asked, "How would you describe your group to someone who had never seen it in action?" most of them volunteered criticism of their peers' reading ability, rather than a description of what happened during group meetings, which is what I expected. They complained that their peers in the group don't know easy words, mess up when reading, read too slow, and are often confused.

Finally, Dahl students felt Mark thought they were weak readers. Hubert said: "He put me [in that group] because I needed

help on stuff." Claudia believed that Mark had chosen James and the Giant Peach for her group because "it's not a hard book to read" and her group couldn't handle a more challenging one. And Miles complained: "You feel all locked up with the kids that you know need help." Dahl students' awareness of their own weakness in reading and their sense of being singled out as incapable every year in school, may have made them afraid to offer their ideas--they may have been unsure of their own comprehension.

Mark considered Twain students to be much better readers than their Dahl classmates. Even though many of these students mentioned in interviews how difficult Twain's book was, they were also eager to tell me how competent their group was at reading. All but one of them made a point of telling me that they and their peers in the group were "good readers" whose ideas were "usually right" or "very interesting."

Further, these students felt their teacher also valued their thinking and gave them unusual freedom to share their ideas. Christopher said : "Mark wants to see how everyone feels about the book and their point about the book and stuff." Boris agreed: "He is looking to see what you thought about it." And Julia concurred: "He really wants our opinions." It is no wonder that these students contributed confidently to literature group discussions.

What's a Teacher to Do?

When my daughter, Sara, was two and a half she was as frightened as she was delighted when my husband would adopt a

sinister voice and play at being a monster or giant coming after her. Frequently she would demand, "Talk like a normal Papa." Dahl students wanted Mark to talk like a normal teacher.

If informal discussion is valuable, then how can teachers make it work for all children, including those who are comfortable with, or know, only traditional classroom discourse? Of course most children are quite adept at informal conversation with their peers (I can assure you Dahl students were when I observed them before school started and during free periods) but this does not mean they will automatically engage in such conversation with a teacher, in a classroom. We cannot simply tell them to "talk conversationally."

As more and more teachers try to implement small group discussion in their classrooms, it is essential that we pay more attention to <u>teaching</u> talk. If we want all children to add to their oral language repertoire and engage in informal classroom discussion, we need to provide explicit instruction and we need to research the effects of that instruction. Teachers could begin by talking about the kind of talk they expect and why, providing examples, and contrasting it with traditional classroom talk (Heath, 1983). They could work to elevate exploratory talk, or "thinking aloud," helping students see that it can be far more interesting and intellectually productive than right-answer talk. Teachers could engage students in listening to groups of peers talk and follow up with a discussion of that talk. It is interesting to note that the Dahl students had never listened in on other groups

and they assumed their peers were all participating in the same kind of lessons they were. Teachers could invite children to generate and chart guidelines for discussions, which students could refer to and use to reflect on their discussions. Teachers could invite students to role play discussions so that they begin to develop a vision of what informal classroom conversation might look like and coulld try out different forms of participation. Perhaps, also, less confident students would be helped by writing their responses and questions in a dialogue journal or sharing them orally with a partner before coming to a group discussion. Then they would have thought about what they might want to contribute and would have an opportunity to clear up comprehension problems. In order to avoid the kind of frustration Mark felt when Dahl students didn't converse with him and each other as he had hoped, teachers must help students consciously redefine what it means to talk like a normal teacher.